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ABSTRACT

Given the benefits associated with collaboration, the question arises how to enhance collaborative efforts. Some of the forces that enable collaborative efforts are explored in this paper. The paper presents Frederick Erickson's framework of viewing contexts in three semipermeable levels (macrolevel, institutional level, and personal level) in an effort to explicate the kinds of forces that foster such efforts. Erickson proposed that educators and educational researchers take an anthropological look at school contexts when trying to understand school phenomena. To test this proposal, an anthropological view of a successful collaboration is offered. The collaboration was between the Writing Across the Curriculum Director and an instructor in the teacher-education department of a state college. The text focuses on the institutional level and the support offered by the college but emphasizes that the project's success was attributable to the compatibility between the two persons involved. This compatibility included philosophical resonance; intrinsic rewards, such as the intellectual stimulation in solving curricular problems; the time involved; and the personality resonance. Collaboration, therefore, requires the right conditions both on the institutional level and on the personal level. The project's sustainability was only possible because of the resonance found at the personal level. (RJM)

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Using a Anthropological Lens to Study the Enabling Factors in Successful Collaboration

Collaborative efforts have received widespread support in the educational community. Rosenholtz (1989) in her research of eight elementary schools in Tennessee draws a sharp contrast between low-consensus schools and high consensus schools:

> in low consensus schools, few teachers seemed attached to anything or anybody, and seemed more concerned with their own identity than a sense of shared community. Teachers learned about the nature of their work randomly, not deliberately, tending only to follow their individual instincts. For want of common purpose there was little substantive dialogue. Colleagues talked of frustration, failure, tedium, though not in their own person: they manage to transfer those attributes to the students about whom they complained, themselves remaining complacent and aloof. In swapping disconsolate stories, teachers appeared to buy in easily to a painful sense of futility without feeling remorse over the high-quality work they once had earnestly wanted to render. With ambitions lost, teachers tended to go underground staying topside only long enough to do little more than required (p.207).

The isolation associated with low consensus schools gave way to a collaborative spirit that pervaded high consensus schools:

> In high consensus schools, principals and teacher appeared to agree on the definition of teaching and their instructional goals occupied a place of high significance. These schools revealed a style, an attitude, a single-minded characterization. In their out-of-classroom work they culled and socialized the brightest or best educated novices with all the wholeness and harmony of group solidarity. They seemed attentive to instructional goals, to evaluative criteria that gauged their success, and to standards for student conduct that enabled teachers to teach and students to learn. Teachers appeared to partake in shared school goals because their thoughts were not merely their own, but inspired by a multitude of supportive collegial voices (p. 206).

In their study of college teaching Peterson and Finklestein (1993) point out:

> teaching vitality is, at least in part, a product of a

> positive teaching climate: one that affords professors opportunities to work together on teaching and to experience professional growth as teacher-scholars within their disciplines (pp. 21-22).

Furthermore, they note that although college teachers "get energy" from performing well in front of students, "their teaching vitality cannot be sustained indefinetly without extrinsic or institutional support" (p. 25). This institutional support comes in two ways. First, as opportunities involving collaboration on teaching marked by substantive discussion of content in connection with a common group of students. Secondly, given opportunities to venture outside the classroom doing things such as attending professional meetings or spending a sabbatical semester in scholarship or research.

A multitude of benefits have been attributed to collegial relationships between and among teachers. Englert, Tarrant, and Rozendal (1993) report on the following benefits they observed during a long term curricular project between a university faculty and an elementary school faculty:

1) Teacher talk enabled teachers to make their tacit knowledge visible which allowed them to question assumptions about common practice and generate possible alternatives.

2) Teachers gave each other support which allowed them to take curricular and instructional risks.

3) Teachers used each other's knowledge as a source of ideas for their ongoing development and implementation of curricular activities.

Howie and Collinson (1995) view collaboration as more than

just something that can benefit school climates, teachers, and teaching practices. Indeed, they view collaboration as the essential ingredient in learning how to teach:

> learning to teach, just as learning, demands sustained, often structured, highly intellectual discourse among teachers about their assumptions, intention, and justification for their actions. Such discourse, we believe, is the essence of a learning community of teachers It is also the guidepost for good teaching (p. 27).

Given the multitude of benefits associated with collaboration, an obvious question arises: "What can educators do to encourage more collaborative efforts?" This paper, therefore, will look at those forces that enable collaborative efforts. Erickson's framework (1982) of viewing contexts into three semipermeable levels (macro-level, institutional level, and personal level) will be used to aid the understanding of the kinds of forces that enable collaborative efforts. First Erickson's three levels of organization will be presented. Then a successful collaboration project between this author and his colleague will be examined using Erickson's lenses. Finally, conclusions will be drawn.

Three Levels of Organization

Erickson (1982) proposed that both educators and educational researchers must take an anthropological look at school contexts when trying to understand school phenomena, particularly those phenomena that take place in classrooms:

> contingencies of the wider sociocultural system within which the pedagogical encounter is embedded provide patterns of constraint that shape the definitions, social objects, and the opportunities for choice that are present in the immediate scene of everyday life as a "curriculum." These

> wider influences cannot be ignored. Indeed, what is distinctively "anthropological" in such a study is that it considers relationships across all three levels of organization--individual functioning, pedagogical encounter, and wider sociocultural system--is a comparative perspective that considers diverse arrangements across these system levels in a wide range of differing types of human societies (p.167).

It is proposed that to best understand the forces that shape successful and unsuccessful collaborative efforts Erickson's framework be used. Collaborative efforts take place between and among people (personal level), in institutions of some kind (institutional level), and institutions are situated in a wider, socio-cultural system (macro level). Obviously, institutions are effected by the politics of local, state, national and even world governments. We also recognize that there are forces found at the institutional level that can constrain and even prevent collaborative efforts, as well as enhance opportunities for collaboration. But even when there is a favorable institutional environment, there is no guarantee of successful collaborative efforts. Collaboration takes two or more people interacting together. Individual differences such as differing philosophies, motivation, and personalities can short circuit collaborative efforts.

It is interesting to note that very little if any extant literature on collaboration exists that specifically documents linkages between the macro level and the micro level; i.e., showing how political influences from state and national governments impacts collaborative efforts at the institutional level. It is this paper's contention that these influences

exist. Yet, it is beyond the scope of the report to show such linkages. Instead an examination of a successful collaborative effort between this author and his colleague will be examined from the institutional and personal levels of Erickson's framework.

The Institutional Level

Peterson and Finkelstein (1993) point out that faculty members at the college level who wanted to focus on collaborative teaching did so through institution wide faculty development programs. It was their contention that these programs provided a structure that enabled reflection of teaching. This project was a collaborative effort between the Writing Across the Curriculum Director (WAC) and myself--an instructor in the teacher education department. The collaboration began when I was invited to a book discussion group by the WAC Director. These book discussions groups led by the WAC director were a frequent happening on campus. The book discussion I attended focused on using writing as a tool for learning in the classroom. I became intrigued with how I might use writing as a tool for learning in my teacher education course.

It was my contention that one of the most powerful forces shaping the emerging perspective of beginning teachers were the many hours prospective teachers have spent on the other side of the desk (Sikes & Troyna, 1991; Bullough, 1990; Buchman, 1989; Denscombe, 1985; Lacey, 1977; Lortie, 1975--end note might be better). I wanted to explore some of the tacit understandings

that my students brought to teaching from their over 1500 hours spent as pupils.

I began, therefore, talking to the WAC Director about how I might use writing as a tool for unlocking these tacit assumptions. The WAC director invited me to meet with her to brainstorm some ideas. We met several times during the semester. We developed a series of writing activities that we thought would not only unlock the tacit assumptions of beginning teachers but would also help them to critically examine their assumptions and beliefs about teaching and to explore new perspectives on what it means to be a teacher.

The following summer the WAC director came to me with a proposal to write a grant for the project. She told me that the administration would give us financial support to do so. That summer and into the fall semester we met regularly to write the grant and to implement the project.

It is important to note that administration did not in any way dictate to us how the project would go. According to Strawn (1994), administration must support grass roots efforts without dictating what those efforts would look like. This was our experience. Administration provided financial and personnel support; they never dictated to us how the project would look. Instead they gave us ownership of the project.

Personal Level

The institutional support contributed to the genesis of our project, but the overall success of the project can be attributed

to the compatibility the WAC Director and myself had on the personal level. Although the current literature on collaborative efforts points to the importance of personal compatibility, no research to date has focused specifically on the enabling factors at the personal level. Yet, for this project the personal level was of utmost importance.

Philosophical Resonance. The WAC director and myself had philosophical resonance. We were comfortable with the "messing around" that is often associated with curriculum development. We were able to deal with the many uncertainties surrounding the curricular project: How would students respond to the different writing activities? How would we tie the writing activities together into a coherent whole? How would we assess the quality of student work? The ability to suspend judgement on the effectiveness of the project and allow uncertainty to exist was absolutely necessary for the projects success.

We valued the process approach to writing. We built into the writing such activities as prewriting, drafting, peer revising and editing, and publishing. In fact, our intent was to help prospective teachers see writing as process. Furthermore we both saw writing as a tool for learning. We did not, therefore, become "hung up" on grading writing. Instead, we gave students license to take risks.

We also saw teaching as facilitating and coaching--not just dispensing knowledge. For example, during implementation of the project, discussion was our main instructional tool. Although we

would help students by clarifying what they were saying, we allowed students to generate knowledge. There were times, however, we both felt inclined to offer up our "expert" knowledge. But again we felt comfortable doing this.

Intrinsic Rewards. Although there was financial support from administration, the majority of the motivation was intrinsic. It was intellectually stimulating to solve the curricular problems that came up. It was satisfying for me to learn from her and at the same time it was satisfying to be able to offer up my ideas. Moreover, we were spurred on by the initial successes that our students experienced. Our first assignment for students during the implementation of our curricular project was for students to write a significant event that happened during their days as students. In order to "unlock" their school day memories we used a heuristic device we called a cluster chart. In the center of the board we wrote school days. We then asked students to recount their remembrances of their school days. A barrage of information was given. Each new word spurred more memories. After we filled the board with school day memories, students were very motivated to put to paper a significant story of their past. For us it was exciting to see. We felt we were charting new ground with the activity. The excitement in students faces assured us that this was indeed a worthwhile project.

Not only did we have successes with students, we were gaining successes with our peers. We presented our work at

several national conferences. Those in attendance listened enthusiastically. After our sessions, we had more in-depth conversations from curious professional across the country.

Time Commitment. We both were willing to commit a great deal of time to the project. There were initial brainstorming sessions. There was the time consuming search through the literature to find what had been done previously. There were several meetings in which we refined the ideas we initially set down. During the implementation phase we held weekly meetings collecting data from our students and deciding what we would do for next time. Even after the implementation of the first semester was finished, we continued to discuss how we might refine our ideas. We spent a lot of time writing up proposals and papers for national conferences. As we looked back on the time we spent working on the project, we discovered that the financial support we got for the first summer we worked on the project was very insignificant when compared with all of the time we spent on the project.

Personality Resonance. Apart from our philosophical similarities, the intrinsic rewards we received, and the commitment we were willing to make, the project worked because we liked spending time together. There was a friendly relationship that developed. We spent a lot of time getting to know each other and each other's families. We attended professional meetings together. We had family get-to-gathers. Personality resonance helped us to develop a trust in each other. I trusted

her ideas; and she trusted mine. This trust gave us the ability to question each other's thinking without putting either of us in a defensive posture. In short, without this personality resonance the project would not have worked as well as it did.

Conclusions

Collaboration is important. As Peterson and Finklestein (1993) point out, collaboration adds vitality to teaching. It creates the opportunities to refine ones thinking and at the same time extends ones thinking. But collaboration doesn't just happen; it takes the right conditions both on the institutional level and the personal level. Although little research has been done on the personal level--let alone the macro-level), it should not be ignored. There is no way this collaborative project would have been successful with out the compatibility between the collaborators. Granted, without the institutional structure of the WAC program and administration's monetary incentives the project would not have gotten underway. But the sustaining quality of the project was only possible because of the resonance found at the personal level.

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